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SOME FUNDAMENTALS IN THE TEACHING OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION.

A FEW years ago progressive teachers of English had high hopes for the future of composition in the schools. The old system—or lack of system—of long, formal compositions written at infrequent and irregular intervals, of subjects calling for vague moralizing or crude digests of books of reference, of arbitrary and trivial criticism, if any, had given away all along the line to more rational and orderly methods of instruction. Children of twelve were no longer obliged to wrestle with such topics as “Slavery,” “Joy and Duty,” and “Solitude,” as did Mrs. Wiggins’s delightful Rebecca, whose teacher told her that “one” and “one’s” were more refined in writing than “you” and “yours;” that cats, chips, and milk-pails were things too common to mention; and that she didn’t like the idea of “a cow in a composition.” The work was no longer handed over to the teacher with most leisure, or farmed out among all the teachers of the school; but was assigned to a special teacher of English, who had charge, it is true, of classes in literature, rhetoric, and composition, but who at least attempted to “correct” the student’s written work with some degree of thoroughness. Text-books of “rhetoric and composition” increased and multiplied. Practice in writing was made frequent and regular. A “theme” once a week became the ideal and in most cases the attainment of the schools; while some ambitious institutions, fired by the example of the Harvard “daily theme,” provided for even more numerous written exercises. Best of all, the subjects given were no longer unwieldy and remote, but simple and concrete, chosen for their appeal to the child’s own experience and interests. It was no wonder that teachers of English, comparing the new order of things with the old, felt confident that the program of constant practice and simple subjects would soon yield large returns in the shape of honest enthusiasm on the part of the student, and freshness, genuineness, and vigor in his writing.

But so far the returns have not come up to these sanguine expectations, and composition teachers of today are somewhat chastened in spirit, and in many cases actually discouraged and baffled. Looked at in bulk, to be sure, the written work in the schools is on a higher level than it was in the old days of haphazard instruction. It contains probably fewer absurdities, and it is undeniably neater in appearance, more correct in the mechanics of paragraphing, punctuation, and capitalization. But these negative virtues seem a slight reward for the sacrifices of time and strength, the gallons of red ink poured out by painstaking teachers upon the papers of industrious and docile pupils. And, greatest disappointment of all, the expected change in the students' attitude toward their work has not taken place. The gifted child undoubtedly finds fuller opportunities for employing his talent, and in every school there are individual instances of vivid, effective writing; but the average boy and girl still find composition the most distasteful of their school occupations, and candidly inform their teacher that there is nothing they hate so much as "writing themes." If the teacher keeps watch of their struggles in the process, he is not likely to doubt the truth of the remark. The results of writing undertaken in this spirit are naturally deplorable. My observation has been that, while most school compositions give evidence of an amiable desire to carry out the teacher's directions so far as understood, in thought they are without form and void. Anything more sprawling in structure, more meager and colorless in presentation, it would be difficult to imagine. I once heard a teacher of a biologic turn of mind despairingly characterize them as "amoeboid." In such work the trouble lies too far back to be reached by detailed criticism. Positive and glaring faults would afford a welcome handle. Equally discouraging is another type of composition in which the writer pours out words with a "fatal facility," hoping to impress the teacher and the class by his fine writing. Such a student is usually complacent, and feels aggrieved and unconvinced when the teacher points out his unreality and insincerity. In both types persistent practice seems only to wear deeper channels of limp thinking and slipshod statement. And nothing more greatly

astonishes the expectant teacher than the indifferent way in which children write on their dearest and most intimate concerns, about which they will chatter by the hour together.

Betrayed thus by the formula to which we have pinned our faith, it is not surprising that some of us feel at times as if we had come into a blind alley, and are almost ready to subscribe to the assertion not infrequently made that training in writing, except on its more mechanical side, cannot be given in the school. But a comparison with some other kinds of school training and a glance beyond the walls of the schoolroom should disabuse us of this notion. Other types of activity, particularly the arts and handicrafts, are carried on under simplified conditions in the school in such a way as to equip the student for undertaking them in their more complicated forms outside. Never has writing been so normal and so important a social activity as it is today; never has it so closely approached the universality and spontaneity of spoken language. There are few teachers of composition, I suppose, who have not had the experience of seeing pupils of theirs, whose compositions in school were depressingly flabby and inept, turn off in the bracing air of "actual life" straightforward, vigorous written work that hit some particular nail very squarely on the head. But it is unfair to conclude from such an experience that the rough-and-tumble arena of modern life, with its enormous complexity, its inequality of opportunity, its often brutal enforcement of the law of the survival of the fittest, gives the only or the most efficient and economical training to young people in the handling of written language. Such an argument tells against all forms of special equipment, and so overreaches itself. On the other hand, it is equally unfair to assume that the school has nothing to learn from the larger social situation. The very fact that the child who writes listlessly and unwillingly in school may be kindled into eagerness to write outside of school should be enough to show us, if our eyes were not fastened so persistently on the mere writing product, that help in our present difficulties is likely to come from investigation of the child's own attitude toward his writing and of the conditions under which he is set to write.

For us as teachers, however, the best approach to such an investigation is an indirect approach by way of inquiry into our present practice. Hitherto we have accepted the formula of frequent writing on simple subjects pretty much as a rule of thumb. As such its results have not proved satisfactory, and, since no ready-made substitute offers itself, the only course open to us is to examine into its underlying assumptions and presuppositions in order to discover whether we must throw it overboard—in which case some new method of procedure will undoubtedly emerge—or only bring our use of it into closer conformity with its true supporting principles.

There is a good deal of talk nowadays about the importance of having “controlling concepts,” “fundamental principles” in the teaching of any subject; and the implication seems to be that the average teacher somehow manages to scratch along without their aid. The distinction, however, lies in the nature of this controlling principle rather than in the fact of its presence or absence. In one case it is a mere unformulated, uncriticised assumption, gathered from books, from the talk of others, from instruction or chance suggestions in childhood. It is often no more than a “bias,” but nevertheless it shapes and sometimes warps our practice. In the other case, this controlling concept is itself controlled, and serves as a definite instrument for testing and modifying practice. It is developed through a bringing to light and working over of our “mere assumptions,” and the occasion of its development is always some sort of hitch in practice. That such a hitch exists today in our teaching of composition we have already admitted. Our next step must therefore be the marshaling and scrutinizing of its assumptions.

Ask any teacher of composition who is not a mere dullard—and dullards are few in the teaching profession nowadays, and perhaps fewer in English than elsewhere—what he is after, and he will be likely to tell you promptly that he is trying to get his pupils “to express themselves.” Ask him why he wants them to do that, and he will flounder for a while among vague generalizations about “culture” and “self-expression as the goal of individual development.” Pressed for his views on the nature of

language, he will assert that it is an "activity for the expression of thought," a "medium for the expression of thought;" and, if persistently harried, may be driven to admit that this expression is of course for the purpose of conveying the thought to somebody else. But it is easy to see that his aim in the teaching of composition is training in expression, and that this aim is based upon a conception of language as an expressional activity. These two related assumptions dominate his mind and control his practice; and the notion of language as involving communication, while recognized on analysis as implicit in the notion of expression, plays no part whatever in his actual teaching.

Nine-tenths of the instruction in composition at the present time, I think it safe to say, is based upon just these views of the nature of language and the aims of training in writing. The emphasis upon expression is fortified, and perhaps partially justified, by common speech. We speak of "an unusual expression," a person who cannot "express himself," "the gift of expression," etc., etc. Moreover, it is the aspect brought forward in books on composition, even the most recent. Mr. Percival Chubb says in his book, *The Teaching of English*: "Expression is natural and necessary to the child; and wherever there is expression, there is composition. If the medium be words, oral or written, the child is engaged in the process of literary composition." Another book of the same title, the joint work of Professors Carpenter, Baker, and Scott, says: "We use the term . . . 'composition' with reference to instruction and practice in the art of expression, *i. e.*, essay-writing and similar exercises;" and quotes in another chapter from Professor Meiklejohn: "Writing and speaking are simply two forms of one mental act—the act of expression." I am not now discussing what these writers mean to cover by the term "expression," but simply pointing out that their use of it confirms the ordinary teacher in his unanalyzed assumption that language is purely expressional and individual.

There are scattered signs, however, becoming every day more numerous, of a recognition of the communicatory side of language as more than a mere formal element. Professor Scott,

who has long made it a working principle in his teaching, says in his suggestive chapter, "The Philosophy of the Assignment," in the book just mentioned, that the two impulses, to express and to communicate one's thoughts and feelings, are complementary and reciprocal. President Benjamin Ide Wheeler's article on language in the Baldwin *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* defines language as "the communication of thought through speech sounds"; and says further: "Language cannot be defined as merely the expression of thought, for its character and history are determined quite as much by the consideration of intelligibility as by that of expression. The impulse to express is individual, but the function of speech is social." And Professor Cooley's stimulating little book, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, in pointing out the relations of language and thought, says: "The fact is that language, developed by the race through personal intercourse and imparted to the individual in the same way, can never be dissociated from personal intercourse in the mind; and since higher thought involves language, it is always a kind of imaginary conversation. The word and the interlocutor are correlative ideas."

Here, then, almost on the threshold of our inquiry into the assumptions at the base of our practice, we find two views of the function of language, of which one alone, that of expression, has served as an actual controlling principle, while that of communication has remained a dead letter. If they are in truth fundamentally related, it seems fair to suppose that some at least of our troubles in composition teaching arise from this separation and one-sided emphasis. The other side certainly needs to be brought forward, but to emphasize it by itself would be only to put a new face on the old difficulty. What we must have is a further analysis of both aspects in order to bring out their right relations to each other and to our practice.

To begin with the more familiar notion — that of expression: Just what do we mean by the term? Probably it calls up nothing more than a vague idea of the setting free of some sort of activity, the bringing to light of something not hitherto revealed. To express thought is to bring out by means of sounds or symbols of

sounds something that already exists complete and independent in the mind. Modern psychology is with us to the extent of holding that all life involves what may be called expression, and that the higher the organism, the more numerous are its tendencies or impulses toward activity or expression. But it also holds that there is nothing more random and wasteful than bare expression, the mere "touching off" of activity. In fact, it maintains that under normal conditions in higher forms such bare general expression is never found. These impulsive activities begin at once to be co-ordinated and controlled, and so become effective in further development. Organization, not mere relief, the draining off of surcharged activity, is what is meant by growth; and it is through the temporary checking of tendencies to expression that they are worked over into complicated and serviceable co-ordinations. Language as employed by the child of school age is not a mere impulsive activity, but a well-established co-ordination in process of further organization and control. As such, its function is that of organizing thought far more truly than that of merely expressing thought. Thought and language cannot be held apart in any hard and fast way. They are aspects of one reconstruction, and it is misleading to speak of language under any such figure as that of the mere garb of thought. The part that language plays in organizing thought is commonly overlooked in the books on the subject of composition, although we frequently recognize it in experience. It is a hopeful sign that Mr. Chubb lays stress on composition as promoting mental organization.

And what are the conditions, we must ask further, that bring about this organization of impulsive activities into larger and more closely knit co-ordinations? To whatever type of activity we look, we find that the reconstruction comes about through meeting and mastering a particular situation. There is no such thing as co-ordination in general, any more than there is expression in general or thought in general. Speech arises in response to the demands of a particular social situation, and is the means by which that situation is controlled and enlarged. It is at once the instrument and the result of social development. Just in this

lies the communicatory, and therefore social, aspect of language. We are only now coming to understand the essentially social make-up of the individual; and it is largely through language that he builds up his social world and his social self, as it is through more immediate sensori-motor co-ordinations that he builds up his physical world.

It is, indeed, easier to recognize this functioning in a particular situation in the case of spoken than of written language. We obviously talk to some particular person or group of persons about some particular thing. We tell them some piece of news; we request aid or information; we try to persuade them that a thing is true or right. The normal situation is familiar, well defined, and in most cases comparatively easy to control. If it is not, the failure is unmistakable, and we pass on to something else or try a new method of approach. The same thing is true of the more directly practical forms of written communication. Letters, telegrams, advertisements, business notices and reports, arise in specific situations and are addressed to a limited and distinctly recognized public. Their character is almost wholly determined by the occasion that calls them forth and the person or persons for whom they are intended. They serve "merely utilitarian ends," as is sometimes slightly said; that is, ends easily recognized.

It is quite otherwise with the more formal types of writing, with anything that approaches what we ordinarily call literature. Here we forget that written speech came into being originally as a device for controlling a larger situation and a wider public than were possible to control through oral communication alone; although a child's story like Kipling's "How the Alphabet Was Made" were sufficient to remind us. Or else, if we do remember, we hold, with some of our betters, that "origins" have nothing to do with present conditions. Because these conditions—printing, the telegraph, the railway—have expanded the situation enormously and multiplied the number of people involved, we assume that the situation has ceased to exist, or at least to determine the mode of writing, except in the vaguest way. We love to imagine the writer—novelist, essayist, or poet—as a

superior person consumed with an irresistible desire to pour forth his thoughts and feelings for his own satisfaction and relief, and oblivious or scornful of the public. A little inquiry destroys this sentimental illusion by revealing the fact that the majority of literary men have written to meet the pressure of a particular situation—which does not necessarily mean that of gaining their immediate bread and butter—and that more often than not they have had in mind a very specific public, and frequently some one person. While it is undoubtedly true that no piece of literature has ever appealed to that thin abstraction “the general public,” it is equally true that it has always appealed to one of many “publics.” The different magazines or the newspapers of any large city show pretty conclusively the existence of such publics.

And what is the bearing of this long discussion upon our specific problem of composition in the schools? Just this: The ignoring of the situation underlying and conditioning every large literary product has led to an overlooking of the organizing and communicatory or social aspects of language, and a consequent over-insistence upon the expressional and individual aspects. These aspects, and others due to the situation, but not recognized as such, have been generalized and formulated as principles of literary criticism and practice; and then carried over from the world of literature proper, a world of mature and distinguished achievement, into the school world of immature and tentative effort. What we think we are doing is to criticise our students' writing by certain accepted literary principles and standards; what we are really doing is to demand that they shall achieve results brought about only through the largest and most complicated sorts of social situations. We do not recognize that our so-called rules of rhetoric have lost their vitality by being cut away from their source; our students, of course, do not see that there is any sort of normal situation present; and, even if they did, have not reached the stage of organization where they could enter into it, much less manage it. The result is that we spend our time in futile efforts to make them “express themselves” about a world of things that furnish them with no stimulus to

expression; and they spend their time in chafing under this bewildering state of affairs and in groping attempts to meet our incomprehensible demands.

The only actual situation in which the child finds himself is the painful and abnormal one of being obliged to employ an imperfectly controlled and infrequently used co-ordination, that of hand-writing, in order to say something about a subject, in which he may or may not feel an interest, to someone who, he is tolerably certain, is not interested in the subject. It is difficult to conceive a situation more conducive to repression rather than to expression. At first it is likely to result in almost total inhibition. "Frequent practice" may lessen its terrors; but it certainly adds nothing to its reality or intelligibility. And the "simpler" the subject, the closer to the child's own experience, the more often does the writing upon it strike him as a solemn farce; although, of course, he does not phrase it thus to himself. Why should he write about his dog, or his going to the circus, or the schoolroom, when the other children play with Rover as much as he does; have either been to the circus themselves or been told about it in excited whispers and at recess; and are all, together with the teacher, in the habit of seeing the schoolroom for at least four hours a day, five days out of the seven? The teacher's interest in these things, the child's common-sense tells him is manufactured for the occasion. He has had enough experience with grown people at home to detect the difference between sham interest and real. I am intentionally putting the case in its extreme form. There is, of course, a vast difference between well-chosen and ill-chosen subjects within the field of the child's experience; and the teacher's interest is often genuine enough; while his tact and sympathy may have won the hearts of his pupils, and made them plastic material at his hands. But when all is said and done, the motives for writing in most schools remain either pure compulsion, or a desire to shine before the class, or to show affection for the teacher and win commendation in return. The joys of workmanship, of construction, are dormant in composition, I am inclined to think, longer than in any other form of school occupation. Of the teacher's motive of

equipping him for later life the child has, of course, no conception. And so all his stimuli to the writing activity in school are inadequate or illegitimate; and the natural stimulus, the necessity of controlling in this way a situation in which he is vitally involved, never once presents itself, or only in the most casual manner. This is why the child writes better at times out of school than he does in school; and why this successful impromptu writing in face of a real demand, taken together with his attitude of passive rebellion in school, are such important guideposts in our search for a new outlook upon composition teaching.

Successful writing, I take it, is what we are after; so the question before us at this point is simply whether we can introduce into the school, as a regularly employed means of gaining this desirable result, the social situation that produces such successful results sporadically outside of the school. Such a procedure would be strictly in line with the position of modern education, which holds that its purpose is not to put the young into the possession of ready-made results, won in the experience of the race or of the mature individual, but so to simplify and control conditions that they may win the results themselves with only a small degree of the original friction and waste. What we are all trying to do is to supply the proper stimulus, the proper situation, for the fullest development of useful activities, particularly those of large social value. The writing activity, as pre-eminently social, certainly merits this treatment, in order to set free its normal values; but it has heretofore been attempted only in isolated instances, and chiefly outside of the realm of secondary education.

The reasons for this are, first, the failure to recognize the "situation" and its advantages in language training; and, second, the practical difficulties of employing it under present educational conditions. This second consideration is the one before us now; and it cannot be denied that the objections are weighty. But such objections by no means imply that it is useless to keep the idea in mind as a controlling principle. To have a point of view and to attempt to apply it, even imperfectly and with scant immediate success, is the only way to tackle practical difficulties and to bring to light the flaws in a point of view.

The most obvious difficulty of this sort is our poverty of social situations at once within the grasp of the child and demanding reconstruction and control through writing. In spite of all that has been written and talked about the social function of the school and the development within it of community spirit, the fact remains that in the average school as yet there is, on the part of the teachers little consciousness of the one or attempt to foster the other. School is still to most children a more or less disagreeable place where they come to recite their lessons; and their important businesses to their own minds lie entirely outside it, unless there happen to be an external connection by way of athletics. Even in those fortunate schools in which the community idea flourishes and determines practice, the little social group is so small, its activities and problems are so simple and circumscribed, that they are more naturally controlled by other means than that of writing, or, if by writing, only in a few narrow and stereotyped forms.

It is easy to exaggerate this difficulty, although it is very real. But the school is not a closed community. The child is in free circulation between it and his family and the larger world outside. Moreover, he is at an age when imagination, especially in its dramatizing aspects, is very strong; and he has begun to circulate in the world of literature. All these worlds overlap and play into one another. The teacher who studies the child's resources with the "social situation" in mind soon finds that many opportunities for putting him face to face with one suggest themselves. The child has had little adventures while away on a journey that the other members of the class would like to hear about and compare with their own. He knows how to make something or to play some game that another is eager to learn. He must tell a member of the family away on a visit of the happenings at home and in school. He likes to "play" that he is somebody else and to imagine himself in this assumed character as manipulating other specific characters, real and imaginary. For the most part, of course, the situations in which he is or can easily be made a controlling influence are simple, involving only himself and one other person or a small group of familiar persons, mem-

bers of his family, playmates, "book-people," his class, his teacher. His feeling of protest against having to *write* to people around him, instead of talking to them as he would more naturally do, can be done away with by a weaving in of special circumstances in which the substitution of writing for speaking is essential or possesses special advantages. After a time, such suggestions may come from the class. Children delight in constructing situations for themselves; and wise direction and management by the teacher will guard such work from running wild and wasting class time and energy. In general, the possibilities of making the child's writing the outcome of a definite situation are limited only by the teacher's alertness, tact, and resourcefulness. Actual school and home conditions of the children must determine the particular problems presented. The one thing essential is to make every piece of writing a problem, to be solved with reference to a specific occasion (real or imaginary), and for a specific audience (real or imaginary). The one thing to avoid is to set children to writing "at large" with no situation in mind except the arbitrary and unreal one of handing in a "theme" to the teacher for the sole object of having it marked, corrected, and read to a bored class.

Here, however, as elsewhere, there are typical dangers into which even the thoughtful and zealous teacher is likely to fall. Practice nominally based on the soundest principle may become thoroughly artificialized; and the only safe course is to test practice by principle at every step. Especially is this true when we are only just working out the technique of a method. The situation presented is only too likely to become a mere formal device, so that the children look upon it, not as something in which they play a necessary part, but as only another mystery attached to composition writing. The teacher, however much he may try to look at things through the children's eyes, has his own habitual adult standpoint, which leads him frequently into the selection of situations that he thinks *ought* to stimulate the desire to write, but that strike the children as far-fetched and unreal. Perhaps the greatest source of this feeling of unreality on the part of the children is that the composition written — if the situation has

supplied a genuine stimulus—in an honest effort to meet the need of some particular person for what the writer has to say, is, nevertheless, not submitted to that person at all, but to the teacher and to the class, just as under the old method. This leads to an uneasy sense of a double standard, of having been juggled with, and eventually to a disregard of the presented situation altogether in favor of the only actual situation, that of the classroom. This is a serious danger and perhaps inherent in this form of controlling the child's practice. But it is not so serious as many of the evils of the older system, and it may be obviated, or at least minimized, in various ways. One of these is frequently to make the teacher and the class together or separately the actual public addressed. This does not mean that they are to pass sentence on the piece of writing in the old dogmatic fashion; but that the subject is something about which they really wish to know and about which a member is especially fitted to tell them. The class becomes for the time a little club to which first one and then another contributes his share. The teacher, too, sometimes may become the audience, though usually in his social rather than in his strictly professional character. One of the best sets of themes I ever had from a class of girls was when I asked them, shortly after the end of the summer vacation, to help me in my search for a simple and inexpensive cottage in the country that I, with two or three of my friends, teachers like myself, might rent for the next summer. I gave them some idea of our tastes, means, and preferences in regard to location; and they wrote me fresh, vivid descriptions of places that they thought might suit. Another way of making the situation genuine is by submitting the piece of writing to the actual outside person or public for whom it was written. This can be done in various ways—by exchanging papers with other schools or classes, for instance. The plan in active use at present among teachers of modern languages of having students in one country exchange letters with those in another affords an excellent example of this method and of the stimulus given by a real need for communication. Still another way, to be employed more sparingly of necessity, is to give the piece of writing, if it be description or narration, to someone to illustrate.

A water-color sketch made from the theme by a person who has not seen the thing described is a striking test to the writer of how far he has succeeded in solving his problem of communication. But whether the actual person addressed be available or not, it should always be possible for teacher and class to put themselves imaginatively into his place and to test the work in terms of its success or failure in meeting the situation that it set out to meet.

This brings us face to face with the greatest advantage of thus conditioning the student's writing. It enables us to criticise in terms of the situation itself, instead of in terms of abstract principles derived from writing originating in other and larger situations. This does not mean that the two kinds of criticism are fundamentally antagonistic. Their origin is one and the same. But an examination of the reasons for his success or failure in different pieces of his own writing will gradually enable the child to formulate roughly the working principles of successful practice, and will thus give him a basis for the interpretation of "rules of rhetoric" which remain inoperative for him so long as stated in such unconditioned form, for instance, as the laws of "unity," "mass," and "coherence."

The importance of criticising in terms of the situation cannot be overestimated, although I have not space to dwell upon it here. It supplies, in fact, the principle of organization without which the "situation" would be as barren of results as our old formula of "frequent practice and simple subjects." For it is not enough to stimulate the child's temporary interest. That may be done in a variety of ways, some of them ultimately hindering development. The situations suggested should be so chosen and ordered by the teacher that they present a series of problems, each involving a definite kind of control and increasing in complexity until they approach the organization of the types of literature from which our rules of practice are derived. At each stage the child can be made conscious to some extent of the method he is using, and in the later stages can attempt pretty definite formulation. At every step he is helped to this by comparison of his methods with those employed by other members of the class in

dealing with the same situation and with those employed in literature of the same type. While the use of literature as an antecedent model tends to paralyze effort, its use as a subsequent basis of comparison is invaluable. In the same way the student may reinforce and clarify his formulations by comparing them with those in books of rhetoric.

And what, in conclusion, shall we do with our suspected formula of practice, "frequent writing and simple subjects"? As stated thus, its value is indeterminate. But in the light of the survey we have just made we are entitled, I think, to say that the student should write as frequently as he can be furnished with a real situation, an adequate motive for writing; and that his subjects should be simple in the sense of being inherent in a situation that he is able to meet and to control.

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